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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 001261

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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: RECENT OPERATIONS UNDERSCORE PHILIPPINE MILITARY'S  
PRIORITIES

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (a),(b)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Senior Philippine officials have recently emphasized to the Ambassador and other Mission officials that the military has been tasked with showing measurable progress against internal security threats over the next year, and that "a sense of urgency" must be communicated throughout the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to achieve tangible results. The AFP will focus its efforts on three key security threats: rogue Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) forces in Central Mindanao, kidnap-for-ransom gangs operating in the southern Philippines, and the New People's Army (NPA) in certain areas. While recent military operations against all three groups have been successful, shortages of ammunition and other resources pose a significant challenge for continued gains by the AFP. As they press forward with engaging internal security threats, the AFP leadership have said they would like to explore some flexibility in the U.S.-Philippine schedule of bilateral exercises over the next year, in order to ensure adequate participation by AFP forces. Over the last two weeks, the AFP carried out coordinated air and ground assaults against rogue MILF camps in Maguindanao Province that killed or wounded dozens of rogue MILF fighters, and engaged a group of kidnappers that have been operating on the island of Basilan, killing the group's leader and several members. These successfully coordinated offensives illustrate the Philippine military's ability to mount aggressive operations, while limiting civilian casualties. However, the international community remains concerned over the number of persons displaced in Mindanao by fighting there between the AFP and MILF. The Philippine government has emphasized its intent to minimize the civilian impact in all military operations, and has said it remains committed to an early return to peace negotiations with the MILF. END SUMMARY.

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"SENSE OF URGENCY" FOR INTERNAL SECURITY OPERATIONS  
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12. (C) In a June 5 breakfast, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff General Victor Ibrado told the Ambassador that President Arroyo had renewed her directive to the military to step up operations against internal security threats, specifically, rogue Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) forces in Central Mindanao, kidnap-for-ransom gangs operating in the southern Philippines, and New People's Army (NPA) fronts in southern Mindanao and the Visayas region. Separately, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro has said recently that the Arroyo administration is running out of time to deliver on promises to end insurgent activities by May 2010, when President Arroyo's term expires, and that he believed the AFP had to maintain a high operational tempo over the next year

to achieve some "demonstrable results."

13. (C) Ibrado said the "sense of urgency" in the AFP has caused the military leadership to look closely at the robust U.S.-Philippine schedule of events to determine what personnel resources the Philippines will need to make available, particularly with regard to bilateral exercises such as Balikatan, Talon/PHIBLEX, and Combined Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT). Given the demands of the Philippine internal security operations, Ibrado has signaled his intent to request that the August 2009 Mutual Defense Board/Security Engagement Board Executive Committee meetings be held in Manila instead of Honolulu to ensure high-level Philippine participation. The AFP also has voiced their desire for flexibility in the U.S.-Philippine bilateral exercise schedule, to allow Philippine forces to be adequately involved. Compounding the AFP's personnel constraints are shortages in ammunition and other equipment, which could hamper offensive operations. The Mission is working with AFP counterparts to explore options that could assist in alleviating some of the resource shortfalls.

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PHILIPPINE MILITARY ATTACKING MULTIPLE TARGETS  
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14. (C) Responding to President Arroyo's directive, in the last week, the Philippine military has conducted aggressive operations against rogue commanders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) who have killed civilians and destroyed villages in provinces throughout central and southern Mindanao since the breakdown of peace talks in

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August 2008. The AFP said that the Philippine Air Force had bombarded rebel camps in the southern Mindanao province of Maguindanao with precision air strikes on June 7, killing and wounding "scores" of MILF rebels located in the camps. This operation was part of well-coordinated AFP ground and air attacks against MILF strongholds, including camps of rebel MILF commander Ameril Umbra Kato. The Philippine military has been pursuing Kato since August 2008, when he led attacks on civilian communities in North Cotabato Province.

15. (C) On June 8, the Philippine military reported that two additional MILF rebel camps in Maguindanao Province were also captured. The Philippine military reported these camps, which were within five kilometers of the main highway in Maguindanao, were used to manufacture bombs and weapons. A total of 29 improvised explosive devices were discovered when the AFP overran the two camps. The military maintains that its persistent operations against rogue MILF commanders and their fighters have made them more vulnerable, as they have been forced to abandon their traditional safehavens and move from location to location. Many of these former MILF safehavens were considered classic guerrilla bases -- well-concealed, supported with multiple fighting positions, and outfitted with dedicated living facilities. Additionally, prior to the outbreak of hostilities last August, the vast majority of these camps had been off limits to the AFP under the terms of a cease-fire agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF.

16. (C) In late May, combined Philippine forces engaged a kidnap-for-ransom group operating on Basilan island in the Sulu Archipelago. After Philippine officials had secured the release of hostages, military personnel attacked the kidnappers' camp, killing the group's leader and several gang members. Kidnapping continues to be a source of revenue for criminal and terrorist organizations in the Philippines, and the success of the Basilan operation indicates the AFP has made the decision to use force to try to neutralize the kidnapping organizations, although the safety of the victims remains a priority.

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## CONFLICT DISPLACES CIVILIANS

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17. (C) While operations conducted by the Philippine military against rogue MILF fighters in Mindanao have for the most part been disciplined and measured, the terrorizing of local civilians and destruction of villages by rogue MILF elements that began in 2008 has displaced thousands of civilians in areas of central and southern Mindanao. At one point, the estimated number of internally displaced persons was estimated to be as high as 500,000. With the support of international and local relief agencies, the displaced civilians have received food and shelter in government-run camps in Mindanao. According to recent figures, the Philippine Department of Social Welfare estimates the number of displaced civilians living inside and outside the camps at around 250,000 persons. But the Philippine government has voiced concern to international aid groups that their food and medical assistance is being diverted from the main aid target groups -- women and children -- to relatives and friends who are MILF fighters. In a recent meeting, Secretary of Social Welfare and Development speranza Cabral and Secretary Teodoro called together key aid groups and suggested that they begin winding down the feeding programs for IDPs, whic they suggested were aiding insurgents.

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) General Ibrado and Scretary Teodoro see opportunity in President Arryo's directive to achieve results against the varous internal security threats before her term ends next year. During his tenure as head of CentralCommand in the Visayas, Ibrado enjoyed success i dismantling a large number of NPA fronts in theregion. In its campaign against rogue insurgent ommanders, the Philippine military continues to egrade the MILF's military capability, a stated gol of Teodoro and Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno. Meanwhile, eliminating the kidnapping threat addresses the concerns of a wide array of local citizens, as even farmers and fishermen have become targets of kidnap gangs. The Philippine government has repeatedly stated that it prefers peace over conflict. But recent successes on the battlefield may well

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have reinforced more conservative Cabinet members who argue that, should peace talks be resumed, the MILF may find itself in a weaker bargaining position now that its capacity to conduct military operations has been materially diminished by the Philippine military's successful operations.

KENNEY